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ABSTRACT

After a number of years of study by many experts, adolescent sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and childbearing have continued to elude understanding and control. Orthodox students and clinicians have studiously avoided the moral dimensions of such behavior, in spite of the social reality of values and expectations that reject precocious sexuality. Adults must take responsibility for the moral tenor of our society; adolescents should not be subsidized, emotionally or financially, for rejecting these expectations; and counseling and educational strategies should consider the potential contribution of high expectations for adolescent responsibility and personal honor, leading to higher self-esteem and more disciplined sexual expression. (Author)

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ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY AND CHILDBEARING
A Different Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

For the last three years the National Council on Family Relations has held a formal section meeting on adolescent sexuality, pregnancy, childbearing, and parenthood. It has been my privilege to chair those meetings, at which we have had the benefit of expert judgment on what is happening and why in this tumultuous and feeling-laden area of behavior. We have heard a lot of statistics about adolescents during the last three years. We have heard about biological changes, especially the declining age at menarche. We have heard about the lack of fit between family functions and the world of work. We have heard about parenting education, the importance of adolescent fathers, and the influence of peers. We have heard about the failures of schools, the conflicts and naivete of parents, the silence or the intransigence of churches, the pros and cons of contraception, abortion, the welfare system, the rate of divorce, Watergate, and the Viet Nam War. We have heard about the contradiction implied by adult expectations for adolescent sexual restraint in a culture fascinated by, and exploitative of, not only sex but all kinds of gratification. We have heard at great length about poverty and racism, while noting at the same time that the problem is not the exclusive concern of the poor or of minorities.

As I survey these accomplishments from the perspective of the past three years, my conclusions are first: there is truth in all of these things, and second: we are mighty confused.

I earned my credentials as a sociologist in a distinguished university department that prided itself on measurement (a perspective, by the way, which I share, respect, and cherish). As good empiricists we labored to quantify, exposing murky reifications with the zeal of an inquisitor.

We excised value-laden assumptions with the quiet professional pride of a surgeon who has successfully removed a brain tumor: we were aware of the pain involved for the patient, but after all, the work had to be done.

Above all, we were taught not to go beyond our data. It is with considerable humility and anxiety, therefore, that I do just that on this occasion. In offering a few remarks on adolescent sexuality and childbearing, I will most assuredly go beyond my data, invoke value-laden assumptions, and otherwise foul my own nest. Three years of wrestling with the subject, however, as an academic sociologist, a creator of educational materials, and as a board member of an advocacy group for adolescent parents, leave me with no other option. Please forgive, therefore, what is reckless in my presumption; the motive is one of helping.

We Are Getting Tired

To begin with, as a society we will soon begin to grow tired of the subject of adolescent sexuality and childbearing. It has fascinated and frightened young and old alike for a long time, but the last several years have seen a remarkable outpouring of energy and attention. Why has this been so? Is it because adolescent sexual activity, and especially pregnancy and childbearing, threaten parents, upset school boards, add to welfare costs, or what have you? These things and many more are doubtless involved, but at the root of the issue, I think, is a vaster concern. While births to teenagers have risen in many countries, including the socialist states (with possible exception of the Peoples Republic of China), my concern is to understand the phenomenon in the United States. I suggest that we have been greatly exercised and upset by adolescent sexuality within this country for two main reasons, which at first glance appear to be contradictory, but which

in fact are complementary.

First, adolescent sexuality directly questions our unspoken allegiance to the American political and educational metaphysics of the "bon sauvage." Just as the Rousseauian vision of natural man, uncorrupted by private property and technology, maintained that "natural" and "good" were synonymous, so contemporary educational practices assume - nay, believe - that man is good and man will learn, and if he doesn't, it's the fault of the economy, or child-rearing practices, or something. Why then does such a good and natural thing as sex cause so darned much trouble? The kids remind us, therefore, of our own unconfirmed belief in ourselves, which so often is not borne out in practice, and we are upset that the kids have presented the issue, by default, with such alarming clarity.

Second, adolescent sexuality has been a big issue because it has kept us hopping to find explanations that will serve without invoking morality. This, I suggest, is a futile and exhausting enterprise, roughly equivalent to the fabled Army practice of setting recruits to work digging holes and filling them up again. Whatever its failings, American society has an intensely moral historical and present-day endowment and concern. Ever since the end of World War II, however, when we entered the Big Time, we have been somewhat embarrassed by moral allegiances, thinking others might find us provincial, parochial, and credulous; furthermore, we have been fascinated by our technology, hoping that it would not only make life more dependable, but that it would also relieve us of some of the burdens and consequences of decision-making. As it turns out, however, man cannot do everything and must make choices; these choices are based on values which in turn are allied with and usually derive from historically identifiable

communities of belief, and in honest language this is called morality. The fact that there are diversities of moral domains in human society in no way invalidates this fact, and may only reinforce it. In one way or another, we are aware that man's behavior is problematical and requires a good deal of attention if conscience and the common good are going to be well served. Adolescent sexuality and childbearing have been big issues for us, therefore, not only because they are dysfunctional in a technological society valuing long periods of education, but also because in our case they are a rebuke to thousands of years of general agreement on how things were supposed to be done, whether or not it was always that way in practice. At least the agreement was there, and the deviance was censured, closeted, or somehow accommodated, but not proclaimed to be normative, desirable, or inevitable. The Gallup Poll of April 21-24, 1978, reported substantial majorities of contemporary Americans welcoming more respect for authority and close family ties, while opposing more acceptance of sexual freedom. "The times, they are a-changin'!"

Thinking, Willing, and Choosing

As I have said, a decade of struggle with an issue that challenges our most fundamental political and spiritual imagery, not to mention the nurturing, educating, launching, and economic functions of the family as the prime human institution, has left us, as a society, tired. We are quite aware that sexual experimentation among the young will go on in some degree, as it always has, but we are growing tired of this degree of sexual precocity, pregnancy (and impregnating), and childbearing. Being tired, if we continue to be challenged, we will become angry. Being angry, we will respond with force, one way or the other. Adolescents and those who counsel them should make no mistake: teenagers may have sufficient money for stereos and used

cars, but they have very little real power. If there is a backlash, it will be the adolescents--and their babies--who will suffer most.

What, then, shall we say to adolescents, who after all, did not invent sex and who are not the first to feel its urgings? At the opening of my remarks I listed some of the things that distinguished and perceptive experts have correctly identified as important independent variables in understanding contemporary adolescent sexuality. Perhaps because they have characteristically viewed human behavior as a dependent variable, however, we find little or no mention of such concepts as thought, will, and choice. The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, in contrast, has emphasized the challenge to adult authority implicit in adolescent sexuality (Committee on Adolescence, 1978). Others who work on a clinical level with pregnant teenagers (Cobliner, et al., 1973) have commented on the passivity of many pregnant young women (their male partners, for the most part, displaying the ultimate passivity of total absence). Like Piaget's (1970) "operative thinking," which stimulates planning and bestows energy by linking our present acts and circumstances to a perceived future that we imagine and make real in our minds, higher order thinking--which is active, not passive, and which is also more adaptive and has greater survival value--is necessary for completing childhood and launching a career and planning a family. In my own mind I contrast Piaget's self-controlled and controlling thinking with that revealed by a teen-ager who told me that she eventually decided to tell her mother "when I come up pregnant." The language of thinking, willing, and choosing could not be more different.

You are Responsible for What You Do

I asked what we are to say to adolescents about this. If my analysis is correct (in the long run I think it is), if we really do have the well-being

of our teenagers at heart, and if, as the clinicians put it, we are in touch with our feelings as adults, we will begin to say "You are responsible for what you do." We will begin to say things that we have heretofore been constrained from saying for the past decade not only because we were told by certain adolescents and certain experts on adolescents that such admonition wouldn't work, but also because we didn't think it would work either. We thought it was coercive, repressive, moralistic, and square. We were told that the teens wouldn't even listen, and although we knew that adults couldn't get away with reckless acts at home or at work, we didn't say too much about it when it came to kids and sex, partially because we wanted them to love us, and partially because we were afraid of them. In this most litigious of times, we wanted to avoid arguments akin to civil rights disputes. We remembered when cruel ostracism drove girls from school or to clandestine and dangerous abortions, and we were sure, quite properly, that we wanted none of that. We were less sure of ourselves, however, when it came to seeming to endorse easy sex, but we were confident that broadmindedness was a virtue--and besides, relativity in values made us seem younger and took us off the hook. In any case, like nature, norms abhor such a vacuum, and we soon saw an identifiable trend in the results of adolescent sexuality.

The National Center for Health Statistics (1977) has documented the dramatic increase in teenage childbearing, to which we must add the comparable statistics for abortion, which are still probably under-reported, while the loneliness, fear, expense, stress and familial agony are represented by no statistics at all. The statistics we have, however, reveal a moral crisis on the part of an adult world that forgot the obligations of adults to set limits as well as to offer opportunities for children. These statistics also reveal a moral crisis on the part of adolescents, who want privileges without responsibilities, actions without consequences, and who, with the self-centeredness characteristic of children, are content for the most part to let the

grown-ups worry about it--or at least pay for it.

That is why I think it is important to say to our children, "You are responsible for what you do."

Counting the Cost

Illegitimacy, and for that matter, adolescent sexual activity in general, has always been expensive in so-called advanced societies--financially, emotionally, and culturally. Illegitimacy rates, though different by age groups, are still high and getting higher. The birth rate for women 18-19 years old in the United States is declining, in parallel with rates for all women 18 and older, but their illegitimacy rate, like that of the 15-17 year olds, is increasing: between 1966 and 1975, by 27 percent for the older teens, and by 49 percent for the younger teens (National Center for Health Statistics, 1977). A recent and responsible study estimates that if current rates and circumstances continue in this country, by the time the current 14 year old girls are 20 years old (1984!), 21 percent will give birth, 15 percent will obtain a legal abortion, six percent will have a miscarriage or stillbirth, and 34-39 percent will experience at least one pregnancy (Tietze, 1978).

The logic is simple: the cost is also increasing; and not only because of the financial cost, but perhaps even more importantly because of the emotional and cultural cost, we are starting to count. Quite frankly, I am apprehensive because I fear and expect two things. First, I expect demoralization on the part of those who are inclined to help. Second, I expect a backlash of anger, perhaps in the form of a taxpayers' revolt of some kind.

Concerning demoralization, as one who has been involved for several years with adolescent sexuality and parenthood organizations at the local, state, and national levels, I sense a lessening of energy and note a decline in funding. This is happening, I think, because of an intuitive sense that this phenomenon

may be about to top out, not so much as a social problem but as a claimant on the public's attention, and so we begin disengagement behavior. Those inclined to help are further demoralized, however, because of the cognitive and emotional dissonance involved in carrying on programs that studiously ignore what helpers know in their hearts is the moral issue underlying all the talk about parental relationships, racism, job opportunities, and the educational system, however important all these latter things undeniably are.

Concerning anger, which, as I have suggested, comes when we are told to continue to do something that has already made us tired and which is costly to us, that anger is more likely to be expressed these days in fewer dollars and neglect of programs than in contrary policy. That is, I do not expect the enactment of specific statutes overtly prejudicial to adolescent parents or the sexually precocious. What is more likely is the increasing refusal to fund existing programs at anything near an optimal level. Poor sex education, poor abortion facilities, poor pre-natal care, poor day care and educational programs, and low welfare payments will have their effect, in time. The word will get around, hard on the heels of the suffering. This suffering, it will be noted, is far more elective than that which derives, for example, from physical or mental handicaps, and as such will have a far less powerful claim on what will be perceived as limited community resources. While it would be nice if adolescents accepted responsibility for their behavior in any circumstances, in this view it will become increasingly difficult for them to avoid doing so.

Self-esteem, Control, and Honor

Referring to a theory of "learned helplessness," Arlene Skolnick (1978) in speaking of the findings of the University of California Institute of

Human Development thirty-year longitudinal study of 200 children, observed that "Self esteem and a sense of competence may not depend on whether we experience good or bad events, but rather on whether we perceive some control over what happens to us." Skolnick argues for looking away from parental influence in shaping the behavior of children to the influence of society and its institutions.

We have tried to do that during the past three years in our discussions of adolescent sexuality and childbearing, and we are still left with the questions: what changes in what institutions will make what differences (remember, illegitimacy is rising in societies governed by various philosophies), and why is it that there are some adolescents in a given society who are not sexually precocious? It is currently estimated nationally that among girls under 15, one out of five has had sexual intercourse, and that half of all teenagers will have experienced intercourse before reaching the age of high school graduation. But what about the 80 percent of those under 15 who haven't had intercourse, and the half of the older teens who reach graduation age without that experience? What's different about them? Are they shy? Are they plugged into a different set of societal and institutional influences? Or do they somehow see the sexuality issue differently from their sexually active peers? Does life look different to them?

Self-esteem, an interior sense of control over one's circumstances, and--as I have argued elsewhere (Bruce, 1978)--a sense of "futuraity" are key issues awaiting further attention in our effort to understand and to help in the area of adolescent sexuality and childbearing. We ought to make it clear, however, that it is as easy to become lost in the swamp of intra and interpersonal variables as it is to become lost in the galactic spaces of the societal and institutional, and that we can offer no guarantees.

In short, I don't think the kids should wait for us. What is more, taking the responsibility for sexual behavior out of the kids' hands and assigning it to the impersonal influence of society and its institutions, is really an act of condescension. In the charmingly antique language of another day (not so long ago), it is an offense against their honor.

I don't think that the kids should wait for us. I think they should cherish and defend their own honor (we may call it self-esteem, if honor makes us nervous), by asserting that they do in fact make choices and are responsible for what they do or don't do; and I think that we ought to make it clear that when all is said and done, only they can do that for themselves (that's when the self-esteem part begins to be more than a metaphor). Jesse Jackson's EXCEL program has been criticized for a similar message of self-reliance in the field of education, on the grounds that he is pandering to reactionary elements by blaming the victim, and getting superficial and short-term results by the methods of tent-style revivalism. The kids, I am told, hear him gladly. A lot of them are pretty cool, so why is that? I think it is because, by putting the ball in their court, he is taking them seriously. He is saying that they have honor, to be cherished. Furthermore, Jackson is not saying that there aren't "forces out there" that contribute to a problem. He is saying that those who suffer from those forces, whatever they are, can't afford to wait for them to go away, or for somebody else to solve the problem. If you want to feel good about yourself, he says saltily, stop crying and start sweating. Are you always going to succeed? No. Are you more likely to succeed? Yes. The same challenge, I think, holds true for our present subject matter.

Adolescent sexual intercourse and adolescent parenthood are not Rousseauian frolics reminiscent of Captain Cook's sailors among the nubile

maidens of the Sandwich Islands, nor are these things usefully blamed entirely on the inadequacy of the worlds of work, education, religion, parenthood, technology, politics, or what have you. Adolescent sexuality tends for the most part to be furtive, compensatory, exploitative, and often tragic. The issue is almost never sex; it is almost always self-esteem, or purpose in life, and sooner or later it comes down to what kinds of decisions you make and the choices with which you live.

Take Charge

The expressions of high self-esteem or the directions of purpose in life for teen agers will surely not all be alike, a diversity in which we should rejoice. In a creative diversity of purposeful young people, however, I think we are sure to find a constant: they took responsibility for themselves as best they possibly could at their age. A population of teenagers with a lot of self-respect and a strong sense of the future, based on the realization that they have to take charge of their own behavior, will, I believe, be a population of teenagers with a reasonably disciplined sex life and certainly a low rate of premarital childbearing.

If adults want to help, the first thing they can do is come to terms emotionally and politically with the idea that their adolescents really are responsible for what they do; from that point on, all sorts of helpful things are possible, so long as the adults don't blink. For example, adults can reclaim their privileges and responsibilities to say what they think is right and wrong, and what they will and won't stand for or pay for. Remembering their own youth and the love they bear their children, they can forgive and they can relieve, but they need not condone and they must expect better things from their children in the future. I once had a professor of social psychology,

a disciple of George Herbert Mead, who said, "we need fewer institutes of child development, and more institutes of adult expectations."

From this perspective, the goal is not only lower rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing, but less adolescent intercourse, deriving from greater self-worth which puts a high value on intimacy, personal autonomy, and willingness to work for a worthwhile future. Adults can help by preparing adolescents for real participation in the responsibilities, as well as the privileges, of adult life. Because in this analysis an identifiable moral, affectional, and behavioral perspective is a crucial issue, it is my view that adults can also help by seeing to it that more care and programs for the already pregnant are provided by local religious and philanthropic groups, and less provided by the state or its dependent institutions; our tax deduction and disbursement structure ought to reflect and encourage such provision.¹ Employment opportunity and career counseling, especially for girls, ought to be increased. Adolescent fathers should be expected, with whatever constraints are necessary, to carry their share of the freight. Abortion ought to be available as an elective, but whenever possible the cost should be borne by the young people (girls and boys) themselves, preferably by some kind of non-mutual work, and apart from genuinely extraordinary circumstances the adult parents of both partners should be separately informed, in a counseling setting if indicated; some would consider this to be a retrograde attitude, but I am not confident that overall anyone but parents are likely to take the long-term interest in an adolescent that will be necessary to embark on a successful post-abortion future. Sex education and family life

¹ For an elequent defense of this position from the point of view of general social policy, see Berger, Peter and Richard John Neuhaus, To Empower People. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., 1977

education should be encouraged at home and made mandatory in school, and some kind of competency level should be developed, both for students and for teachers. While I agree that contraceptives should be available from responsible providers to adolescents who consciously elect to go to such sources, whether or not contraceptives should be available on grocery store shelves or in high school bathrooms is a false issue, in my view; apart from the implicit message that sexual intercourse is thereby condoned at best or accepted at worst, we already know that teenagers are ambivalent about intercourse and avoid the use of contraceptives. This ambivalence and avoidance derives in large part, I think, from a latent awareness on the part of the adolescents that the issue is more than sexual, and I suggest that we should be slow to do anything that might lessen this awareness; more than contraception is at stake.

In summary, if adults think the present situation is unsatisfactory and want to help, the goal is not anger, but the steady resolve to place responsibility where it is most identifiably relevant: with the adolescents themselves. The implementation of such a policy will take time, and it will not be unmixed with grief. In the long run, however, such a persuasion gives far more hope for the future.

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